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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Twentieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 513th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 15 January 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Miss MASON

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS BY STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Belize (continued) [CRC/C/3/Add.46; CRC/C/Q/BELI.1 (List of Issues); written replies by the Government of Belize to the questions on the List of Issues (document without a symbol distributed in the meeting room, in English only)]

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Belize resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. Mrs. MOKHUANE said it was her understanding that evaluation visits to children's placement centres were only conducted in certain cases. It seemed there were no visits when children had been placed with their consent for psychiatric reasons; she would like to know why. The high suicide rate among young people, especially girls, was largely due to family problems, and she asked whether specific programmes had been set up to resolve them. She inquired about the methods used by young people to commit suicide and asked whether they had access to firearms. She was also concerned by early pregnancies and their consequences for the schooling of teenage girls, and asked whether there were studies and programmes concerning contraception for young people and whether the Government intended to take measures to prevent pregnant girls from being excluded from the educational system.

3. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) said that the latest figures available, which had been collected at the Lima Conference, indicated that slightly less than 50 per cent of infants under the age of three months were breastfed, but as the surveys which had produced those figures had been based on samples with low representativity, the actual figures were probably much higher. Prior to 1991, a very active NGO, Breast is Best, had been instrumental in attaining figures in the order of 75 to 80 per cent, but it had had to stop work for lack of financing and the promotion of maternal breastfeeding had become the responsibility of the Government, which required funds to carry out a comprehensive study. Despite the efforts made, none of Belize's hospitals met the conditions required to be labelled a "Baby-Friendly Hospital", although one was quite close. An up-to-date and comprehensive study on the incidence of HIV/AIDS among young people was also badly needed. According to the figures gathered for the Lima Conference, from 1986 to 1996 494 persons had contracted HIV and 196 persons had contracted AIDS. Most were in the 15-34 year age group. A multisectoral working group was currently working on a policy to combat HIV/AIDS, on the basis of opinions sought from different population groups. According to a 1993 study, less than half of sexually active women used contraception.

4. The UNICEF-sponsored project on education for parents and society was intended to raise awareness of children's rights not only by parents, but by other key figures of society who would in turn raise the awareness of the rest of the population. The project had first been launched among the rural communities in the Belize district and had recently been extended to the most disadvantaged district in the country, Toledo.

5. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize), replying to a question on paragraph 28 of the report, said that working children were exceptions to the rule whereby child labour was prohibited. The Government was aware of problems regarding recovery of maintenance, which was particularly difficult when the parent responsible for maintenance left the country, and of the need to ratify the 1973 Hague Convention on the recognition and enforcement of decisions relating to maintenance obligations. However, the Families and Children Act was a step in the right direction. Maintenance had been limited to US$25 per week prior to the Act, and the non-payment of such a modest sum had not been sufficient to justify bringing charges. The amount of maintenance to be paid was now set in terms of parents' means and obligations.

6. Concerning early pregnancies, since the 1970s one of the principal Catholic establishments had been arranging for young women to resume their studies after having a baby, but it was still the only one to do so. Teenage girls who had had babies were generally considered to have become adults, and they were offered vocational training rather than the possibility of resuming their studies. The Ministry of Education was working to improve that situation. No customary practices harmful to children other than corporal punishment existed in Belize. Informal adoption, on the other hand, was part of the culture of Belize, like other Caribbean countries, and financing was needed to begin studies on that question.

7. Mr. DAKERS (Belize) denied that there was a high suicide rate among girls in Belize. That might have been so at the time the report was drafted, but suicide was no longer a major problem. Concerning nutrition, he again regretted the lack of recent data. The latest information available dated from 1991. At the time, 44 per cent of children suffering from diarrhoea had been receiving oral rehydration therapy. The situation had doubtless changed over the years, and a comprehensive study was needed. The Ministry of Health had contacted the Statistics Department to that end, but resources were lacking. It was reported that 15.4 per cent of children had retarded growth. The children most severely affected generally lived in the Toledo district, rural areas and Maya communities. Malnutrition reportedly affected 30 per cent of all children, and obesity 15 per cent. Concerning pre-school education, he said that day care and nursery school coverage had unfortunately dropped from 30.9 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 1996. The austerity measures had forced the State to privatize nearly all State-run establishments, and many had closed as a result. The children's poor preparation at the pre-school level had brought about a rise in the repeat rate at the first-grade level, a problem which needed to be resolved. With regard to raising religious leaders' awareness of health issues affecting young people, some recommended practices did at times create friction, but the Church did not put up a strong resistance on the whole. Regarding violence, he cited the establishment of a special unit within the Ministry of Human Development to deal with violence in the family. There was also an urban violence problem due to rival gangs, imported from the United States. A programme established three or four years earlier to provide young unemployed people with basic knowledge and vocational skills had yielded encouraging results, but a comprehensive study was still needed.

8. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that despite the drop-out rate due to early pregnancies, girls remained in the majority in the educational

system. For example, 65 per cent of university students were female. There were more young men loafing in the streets than studying at university. For that reason a centre had been established specifically to provide teenage boys with elementary education and basic vocational skills.

9. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize), replying to a question by Mr. Kolosov, explained that young Belizeans who were deeply attached to firearms were often the children of Belizeans who had emigrated to the United States. Unable to deal with their sudden material prosperity, far away from their cultural roots, such young people joined armed gangs in an attempt to provide themselves with a semblance of family. When they became undesirable in the United States, they were expelled to Belize, where they reproduced those patterns of violence. That was a serious problem which required a multidisciplinary approach: educational, hygiene-oriented, cultural, economic and financial.

10. Replying to a question by Ms. Karp, she said that until relatively recently, the names of child victims of sexual abuse had been published in the newspapers. That practice, which had been sharply criticized by the NGOs, was now prohibited by the Domestic Violence Act. The courts unfortunately did not have the technology to enable children to testify outside the room where the proceedings were taking place. Thus, child victims of sexual abuse were all too often brought face to face with their torturers, which explained why some parents preferred not to place their children in such situations. The authorities were aware of the need for a change in that area.

11. Mr. DAKERS (Belize), replying to a question about assistance for abused children, referred to the Family Services Division, a team of social workers within the Ministry of Human Development in charge of resolving problems of domestic violence and child abuse. NGOs, in particular the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse, were also active in that area. Thus structures did exist, although their scope and quality were unfortunately still insufficient, especially in the rural areas. Staff training had been improved, but the Government would continue its efforts. With regard to the treatments available for children suffering from psychiatric problems, the number of certified psychiatrists and psychologists was admittedly seriously insufficient. The training involved consisted of a lengthy university course, and the remuneration which specialists received did not provide them with a sufficient incentive to practise in the country.

12. Replying to a question concerning the use of contraceptive methods by Belizean adolescents, he said that statistics indicated widespread use of contraception, even among children with religious backgrounds. However, there was a high adolescent pregnancy rate, and the Government would have to raise awareness among young people, both male and female, of the difficulties which early pregnancies presented.

13. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee who so wished to put any final questions to the delegation.

14. Mr. FULCI thanked the members of the delegation for their thorough and detailed replies. Mindful of the need for high-quality education for children, the Committee was deeply concerned at the problems of malnutrition, overcrowding, absenteeism and lack of textbooks and classrooms with which

Belize seemed to be struggling. What exactly was the situation? Was the Government aware of the importance of education to the country's future?

15. The authorities acknowledged that greater efforts must be made to enforce the provisions of the Labour Act concerning child labour more fully (report, para. 294). In that connection, he inquired whether they had considered ratifying ILO Convention No. 138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment.

16. Ms. SARDENBERG said that the authorities should give high priority to all education-related issues, as the school environment provided the ideal context for preparing children for adult life and teaching them the principles set forth in the Convention. Given the lack of recreational, cultural and sports facilities, the Committee recommended that Belize should consider intensifying its cooperation with UNESCO. By improving the quality of education and learning materials, the authorities would be taking a major step towards resolving other problems faced by young people.

17. She asked whether sexual tourism was practised in Belize. Were there labour inspection mechanisms, and what had been the results of the survey on child labour in Belize conducted in cooperation with ILO? What were the results of the technical cooperation programmes established with the Centre for Human Rights and the projects undertaken in cooperation with UNICEF?

18. Ms. OUEDRAOGO noted that the right to education was the principle which had received the most votes in a children's vote on the provisions of the Convention, and asked what measures had been considered to address that concern. Education in Belize was not really free; parents of primary- and secondary-school children still had to buy school supplies, and some schools even asked for a contribution towards school fees. How did the Government ensure that children from disadvantaged families received an education, especially at the primary level, and how did it prevent children from dropping out of school? As in numerous developing countries, many children were not enrolled in the school system, despite the existence of legislation on compulsory education. Was there a programme for the education of children under 14 years of age? In any event, closer cooperation with UNESCO would certainly help the Government of Belize to improve educational conditions in the country.

19. She asked whether the authorities had considered exchanging experience with other countries which had managed to resolve the problem of overcrowded classes. With regard to religious instruction, which was virtually compulsory, she asked what steps had been taken to give effect to the rights laid down in article 14 of the Convention on freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

20. How did the educational system provide for the child's participation in the decision-making process? How was the child's opinion taken into consideration within the family? Did the schools involve parents in decisions concerning their children?

21. The Committee was concerned at the fact that the Ministry of Education's School Rules provided for corporal punishment as a last resort and in a way

that would not cause bodily harm to the student. That limit was very difficult to respect, and she urged the authorities to take the necessary steps, in the framework of the programme to combat violence, to abolish corporal punishment in the schools.

22. Mr. RABAH asked whether street children were assisted by government agencies or by NGOs.

23. There was a contradiction between the legislation on juvenile offenders, which stipulated that people under 16 years of age were to be kept apart from adult offenders except when jointly charged with adult offenders [report, para. 272 (b)], and the obligation to ensure confidentiality of the trial. How were juvenile offenders in police custody or detention treated? The Committee would like to know whether there were special institutions for them, what types of sentences minors served and whether alternative sentences were possible. Were educational and social services available in the prisons and specialized institutions?

24. Referring to paragraph 276 of the report, he asked how the courts fulfilled their obligation to obtain information concerning the juvenile's conduct, home life, school records and medical history, who was responsible for collecting that information and what type of training they had received.

25. Ms. PALME asked whether the authorities exercised supervision over refugee children working on the banana plantations. She joined other speakers in recommending that the authorities should ratify ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment.

26. She asked whether the Belize authorities were cooperating with neighbouring countries to eradicate child sex abuse and trafficking in children and whether the policies they designed to that end took into account the Agenda for Action of the World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held at Stockholm in 1996.

27. The report stated that the infant mortality and maternal mortality rates were very high in the regions with indigenous minorities. It would be interesting to know what the Government was doing to correct that situation and whether it was considering cooperating with UNICEF to bring down those rates.

28. Mr. KOLOSOV noted that paragraph 311 of the report stated that the minimum age for national service should ideally be set at 18 years, but at the very least at 16 years. He strongly encouraged Belize to set the age at 18 years rather than 16. He would also like to know whether young Belizeans served in the armies of neighbouring countries.

29. Ms. KARP asked, in connection with the campaign against HIV/AIDS, whether there were sex education classes in the schools, whether the students were screened for AIDS and who cared for children whose parents had died of AIDS.

30. Regarding juvenile offenders, it would be useful to know whether the Government was considering raising the age of criminal liability, whether

there was a correlation between the school drop-out rate and juvenile delinquency, how many minors were currently in detention and whether they were entitled to free legal assistance. It was unfair for the time spent by a juvenile offender in a certified institution to be longer than the sentence he would have served in prison. Lastly, there should be a law prohibiting corporal punishment in the family and the schools and a campaign against such practices should be organized.

31. Ms. MOKHUANE asked why some parents of intellectually hindered children did not send their children to the establishments provided for them, whether the early stimulation and rehabilitation services in the home which were available for children with developmental delays were effective, whether there was a national screening programme for children with attention disorders and whether there were a sufficient number of recreational facilities and playgrounds.

32. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether teachers were adequately paid in comparison with the rest of the civil service, what measures were taken to improve their skills, which according to the report (para. 222) were relatively weak, whether legal assistance was available, in particular for recovery of maintenance, and whether studies had been conducted on the problem of street children and possible measures to correct it.

33. Ms. OUEDRAOGO asked what measures were being taken to combat alcoholism and drug addiction among teenagers.

34. Ms. PALME asked whether the Government attached much importance to sport, which in her opinion provided distraction from violence and an excellent means for young people to develop their personalities.

35. Ms. SHOMAN (Belize) said that the schools emphasized physical education and sports, especially football and basketball, in particular at the primary school level.

36. There was a legal aid centre, which was run by the bar association but which unfortunately had extremely limited resources at its disposal. In 95 per cent of cases involving young offenders, the young person did not have access to the services of a lawyer.

37. Likewise, people could rarely afford to hire a lawyer where recovery of maintenance was concerned. It should be noted, however, that the children's courts had various means of ensuring recovery of maintenance and could at times order the seizure of the assets of a person owing maintenance.

38. The Government would take into account the Committee's comments regarding the raising of the age of criminal liability. It agreed to set the age of conscription into the armed forces at 18 rather than 16. She noted that the Belizean army, which comprised only 1,200 members, was a strictly volunteer army as yet. To the delegation's knowledge no Belizean youth had ever joined the armed services of a neighbouring country.

39. The problem of the traffic in children and sexual tourism did not arise in Belize.

40. Regarding the administration of juvenile justice, the Government was well aware of the fact that much remained to be done in order to bring Belizean legislation into conformity with the Convention. It badly needed technical assistance in order to do so. It would appreciate assistance from experts with a sound knowledge of the country and its laws in preparing all the necessary reforms.

41. Young offenders under 16 years of age being held in police stations were never kept in the same area as older offenders. The Government would be extending that rule to young people from 16 to 18 years of age, as incidents had occurred where young people in police custody had been ill-treated by older detainees.

42. Parents were entitled to be present when their children were questioned by the police. Police officers who did not respect that right were liable to administrative sanctions.

43. Young detainees were entitled to vocational training, psycho-sociological assistance and assistance for reinsertion on leaving prison, in particular through apprenticeship contracts.

44. Regarding freedom of religion, parents who sent their children to denominational schools were entitled to request that the children not attend religious instruction classes.

45. The Government would take all the necessary measures, within its budgetary limitations, to see that Belize ratified ILO Convention No. 138 as soon as possible.

46. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) acknowledged that there had been serious violations of the fundamental rights of migrant workers in the "banana belt". Their situation was improving, thanks to trade-union activism and national and international reactions. One of the achievements on which the new Government could pride itself was the integration of migrant workers' children into the school system. With assistance from a private school-canteen association - as it lacked the necessary resources - the Government was endeavouring to help the primary schools establish school meal programmes in the poorest neighbourhoods, where children had learning difficulties simply because they went to school on an empty stomach.

47. Mr. DAKERS noted that the data in the report were already five or six years old. In the interim, the Government of Belize had undertaken a very ambitious primary education project in cooperation with the World Bank. More and more teachers were being trained, not only at the primary but also at the secondary level. The situation was not therefore as bleak as Mr. Fulci might think. Regarding cooperation with international partners, referred to by Ms. Sardenberg, he pointed out that the school-canteen association referred to by Ms. Balderamos García had been founded by the wife of the British High Commissioner at the time. It had since become a full-fledged non-governmental organization. The British High Commission Office, through the Voluntary Services Overseas Programme, was providing assistance in prison reform and alternatives to detention measures. An international conference of experts on reforming the juvenile justice system was being planned in Belize. It was

hoped that the conference would find solutions to the problem of overcrowding in prisons and the excessively high number of young people who had served time in a penal institution.

48. Regarding the steps being taken to guarantee the right to education, it should be noted that the budgetary allocation for education had always been the highest one in the social sector, even in times of economic crisis. Innovative measures had been taken to make the best use of school facilities by adjusting schedules to allow as many children as possible to attend school despite the lack of classrooms and teachers. Schools were grouped in such a way as to enable three or four neighbouring communities to pool their resources. In some cases that generated transport costs, but the quality of education was much higher. In addition, as the best teachers tended to prefer working in the city rather than in the countryside, the Government had established a system of incentives (improved staff housing, transport facilities) to make the rural areas more attractive.

49. The members of the Committee had made repeated references to "street children" in their comments. In Belize that term meant children who roamed the streets during the day instead of going to school but all of whom went home at nightfall. No children in Belize slept in the street at night. The children in question were neglected by their parents or the adults who had custody of them because the latter worked or were incapable of caring for them. As they all had a home, they could not be regarded as "street children".

50. There were mechanisms at all levels of the education system in Belize for involving children in decision-making, such as student councils. Regarding their involvement in decision-making within the family, he noted that Belize was a multicultural society and that the degree of involvement in decision-making was largely a function of the cultural standards of the ethnic group in question. Studies had shown that the level of interaction and the mode of decision-making in each ethnic group often reflected the particular traditions of the group concerned. It was therefore impossible to generalize, especially as the principal ethnic groups were far from homogeneous themselves.

51. Disabled children and parents' attitudes towards them was admittedly an area in which much remained to be done. The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons had given rise to many events in Belize, but that had not had a significant impact on parents' behaviour. With the help of a few NGOs the Government was working to bring about a change in attitudes and to train better-qualified staff. Efforts were being made to shed the old system, which had aimed at integrating children into the community through placement in institutions. Solid achievements had been made in early detection and evaluation of disabilities. However, less than 50 per cent of disabled persons currently had access to specialized services. Thus coverage needed to be expanded, and the only way to do so was by improving the working conditions of health professionals. There was a Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education, which worked closely with the Disability Services Division of the Ministry of Human Development. The Unit included specially-trained itinerant teachers who gave classes to disabled children in both urban and rural areas. Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Education,

there were unfortunately far too few of them. In the districts, some teachers already working in a school received special training to help children with specific difficulties.

52. It might be said that boys were currently favoured where recreation was concerned, especially in the area of sports (football and basketball). The Ministry of Women's Affairs was working to develop better-structured programmes for girls. Paradoxically, Belize had been famous for its women's softball teams in the 1950s and 1960s.

53. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that prevention of accidents, in particular road traffic accidents which were a leading cause of death for young people, was one of the Government's main concerns. Orders had been issued making it mandatory for motorcyclists to wear helmets (as unbelievable as it might seem, that had not previously been the case). Action to combat AIDS, which was extremely difficult to implement, had made it necessary to establish a national plan of action and design an actual strategy. A task force already in operation had broadcast radio spot announcements encouraging young people to protect themselves and to avoid promiscuity. However, a comprehensive approach involving both the Government and society at large was needed to cope with the problem. The Government, for its part, had the political will to make further progress.

54. Mr. FULCI congratulated the delegation of Belize on its clear and frank replies, as quality of information rather than quantity was what counted. He recommended that the Government concentrate on children's health and education: in doing so, it would be acting in the best interests not only of the child, but also of the country, whose most precious asset was its children.

55. The CHAIRPERSON, summarizing the Committee members' comments on the report under review, said she hoped that the installation of a new Government would mean hope and progress for the children of Belize. Fresh ideas at the national level, together with ideas and recommendations from the Committee, could not fail to be beneficial for Belizean children. The Committee hoped that the commitments made by the delegation of Belize in the meeting room would be all kept; it welcomed the fact that the members of the delegation had included a minister. Of course, it did not expect all the commitments to be carried out simultaneously, and it was aware of the need for the Government to establish priorities. That having been said, children must be the central concern in the short, medium and long terms.

56. As the members of the Committee had repeatedly stated, reporting should not be regarded as a purely bureaucratic exercise. The delegation should bear in mind that reporting was a continuous process and that it would be returning in five years to explain how the Committee's recommendations had been implemented.

57. The Committee was pleased to learn that the Government intended to embark on legislative reforms to fulfil its obligations under the Convention. Some members had felt that Belize should ratify some of the more important human rights instruments which had a direct impact on respect for the rights of the child. Others had cited the multiplicity of national mechanisms and

the need for coordination among them, in particular the introduction of mediators to help process children's complaints and concerns. In-service training should also be provided for specialists working for and with children.

58. Further study should be given to data collection, which was the means for identifying and defining problems and resolving them successfully.

59. The Committee could never repeat enough that the age of criminal liability and the age of marriage, in particular, were too low in Belize.

60. Greater attention should be paid to the general principles of the Convention, in particular the question of the best interests of the child. Although Belizean children appeared to be well informed of their right to participate, which they did at certain levels, they should be able to do so in their homes, cultural traditions notwithstanding.

61. It had been pointed out that there was a great temptation to believe that the inclusion of civil rights and fundamental freedoms in the Constitution meant that children enjoyed them automatically. That was not the case, and the situation of children with regard to rights and freedoms specifically needed to be examined.

62. Concerning family environment and alternative care, the Committee had been particularly concerned with adoption, especially international adoption, the situation with regard to informal adoption and their consequences for children in such situations, in particular children whose mothers had emigrated and left them in the care of close relatives or society at large. Regarding registration of births, the Government might consider establishing a body of itinerant registrars, as it had done for teachers, in order to reduce the number of newborns who as adults would not be entitled to the services which everyone should have.

63. There could not be free compulsory education at the elementary level if everyone did not have access to it. Without changing the current programme, the Government might improve certain aspects such as the supply of textbooks. It was also very important for children to be able to relax and not spend their free time doing chores.

64. Regarding sexual abuse and drug addiction, she regretted that the delegation had simply repeated the information contained in the report and had not added anything new. The Committee was therefore no closer to an understanding of those particular subjects.

65. On behalf of the members, she encouraged the new Government of Belize to continue its good work, which she was confident would improve the lot of Belizean children in the years to come.

66. Ms. BALDERAMOS GARCIA (Belize) said that the members of the Government of Belize did not consider themselves to be experts. They had undertaken action to implement the Convention and had the political will to make every effort to fulfil that task. Although much had already been accomplished, they realized that much more would have to be done, and they thanked the Committee for the interest it had shown, through its incisive and stimulating questions, in efforts to improve the situation of Belizean children.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.